



# Inhalant Abuse Task Force

## A Campaign to Prevent Inhalant Abuse

Bureau of Substance Abuse Services  
Massachusetts Department of Public Health

Winter 1999

### MA Department of Public Health Proclaims Inhalant Prevention Awareness Week-March 21-27, 1999

A teenage participant in a Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) focus group said of inhalant availability, "It's easy to get. You just go in the store and buy it. They don't ask you why you're buying it; they just figure you need it. Nobody is thinking that they get high off this stuff." Scary when you realize inhalants are highly toxic and can be lethal.

The issue of inhalant abuse came to the attention of the Department of Public Health through a survey reported in "Tobacco, Alcohol, and Other Drug Use Trends Among Massachusetts Public School Adolescents, 1984-93." The school based survey is conducted every three years by the Department of Public Health and is based on a sampling of over 5,000 adolescents across the state. The 1993 survey showed a dramatic increase in the rate of inhalant abuse over the 1990 survey figures. In the Fall of 1993, one out of every four seventh- and eighth-graders polled reported using inhalants during their lifetime.

In response, the Department of Public Health Bureau of Substance Abuse Services created the Massachusetts Inhalant Abuse Task Force to address issues surrounding inhalant abuse in Massachusetts. The Task Force is a joint effort of the Bureau of Substance Abuse Services, CASPAR Youth Program Support Services, the Medical Foundation, and the Massachusetts Prevention Centers (MPC).

The Department of Public Health's *A Breath Away* Campaign is directed toward adults to increase awareness of inhalant abuse. The goals of this initiative are:

1. To increase statewide public awareness of inhalant abuse by young people through the dissemination of educational materials and information about effective prevention strategies;
2. To help parents, teachers, medical and youth professionals, and community members to develop effective community-based prevention strategies.

The *A Breath Away* Campaign, along with its statewide partners, has been instrumental in reducing the rate of inhalant abuse among students across the state. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health survey conducted in 1996 showed a 25% drop in the



From Left to Right: Beth Newell, Prevention Specialist, MPC; Jon Hurst, President of the Retailers Association of MA; Dr. Lisa McCoy, Manager of the MA Inhalant Abuse Task Force; Howard C. Wolfe, Senior Consultant, CASPAR Youth Support Services; Heather Kahn, Health and Medical Reporter, WCVB-TV Channel 5; Dr. Alan Woolf, Director of the MA Poison Control Center; Mayra Rodriguez-Howard, Director of the Bureau of Substance Abuse Services, MA DPH.

### Statewide Roundtable on Inhalant Abuse

As part of the *A Breath Away* Campaign, the Task Force held the first statewide roundtable discussion on inhalant abuse on January 14th. The purpose of the roundtable was to raise awareness of inhalant abuse and to discuss ways to prevent it. Mayra Rodriguez-Howard opened the roundtable. Moderated by Heather Kahn -- WCVB-TV, a Channel 5 Medical/Health Reporter -- the roundtable drew nearly forty participants despite snowy weather.

Dr. Lisa McCoy, Manager of the Task Force, began the roundtable discussion with an overview of the problem and dangers of inhalant abuse. Beth Newell, a prevention specialist from the Northampton Prevention Center, then discussed her work with parents and communities in the western region of the state. Dr. Alan Woolf, Director of the Massachusetts Poison Control Center, addressed the serious medical effects of inhaling toxic substances and the growing need to update physicians and healthcare workers about the issue.

Jon Hurst, President of the Retailers Association of Massachusetts, commented on the need for retailers to better understand the issue of inhalants and inhalant abuse. In partnership with the Task Force, he is spearheading an effort to help educate retailers, employees, and customers about inhalant abuse through a statewide awareness effort during National Inhalants & Poisons Prevention Week, March 21-27, 1999 (see, **Retailers**, page 2, column 1).

Howard Wolfe, an inhalant abuse education and prevention expert and member of the Task Force, concluded the panel presentation with a discussion of prevention measures. The roundtable closed with a lively question and answer session between the audience and the panelists.

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“Tips for Teens” - Free Inhalant Pamphlet Available

Many people have asked the Task Force how and where to get information about inhalant abuse that they can share with adolescents. “Tips for Teens: About Inhalants” was developed by the federal government Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP) to fill this need. The pamphlet is targeted to middle and high school students and emphasizes the negative health effects of inhalants without giving teens ideas about how to use them or telling teens the products that can be abused.

“Tips for Teens,” is part of a pamphlet series that cover topics from alcohol and other drugs to HIV. The pamphlets are available free of charge from the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information. To receive “Tips for Teens: About Inhalants” call 800-729-6686 and ask for publication PHD-631.

Massachusetts Retailers Launch Inhalant Prevention Campaign

The Retailers Association of Massachusetts in conjunction with the Massachusetts Inhalant Abuse Task Force at the Massachusetts Department of Public Health is sponsoring an inhalant abuse prevention campaign. Retailers across the Commonwealth will be stuffing shopping bags with informational flyers for teens and parents about the dangers of inhalants. The campaign will take place March 21-27 during National Inhalant and Poison Awareness Week. Many people are unaware of how dangerous and potentially fatal inhalants can be.

The goal of this campaign is to educate parents and retailers. The purpose of the bag stuffer is to educate parents about the problem of inhalant abuse, how to recognize it, and how to prevent it. Retailers will be receiving information to alert them about the potential abuse of products that they sell. These products may be shoplifted or abused on the store property by shoppers or employees.

For more information about the campaign, please contact Jon Hurst, President of the Retailers Association of Massachusetts at 617-523-1900 or Lisa McCoy, CASPAR Youth Support Services, at 617-623-2080.

Information . . .  
Please

Call 617-623-2080



The Massachusetts Inhalant Abuse Task Force sponsors trainings on inhalant abuse prevention that are tailored to parents, teachers, school administrators, health educators, nurses, criminal justice professionals, and merchants. Contact Lisa McCoy, CASPAR Youth Program Support Services, at 617-623-2080.

Visit our web site:

[www.state.ma.us/dph/inh/inhaskel.htm](http://www.state.ma.us/dph/inh/inhaskel.htm)

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current rate of inhalant abuse (that is, use within the past 30 days) among seventh- and eighth-graders as compared to the 1993 survey. However, our statewide rates are still higher than the national averages.

During Inhalant Prevention Awareness Week, the A Breath Away Campaign will work with retailers and medical professionals across the state to develop community based initiatives to increase awareness of the dangers of inhalant abuse (see, *Retailers*, page 2, column 1).

For more information about the Department of Public Health’s campaign or the Inhalant Abuse Prevention Awareness Week activities, please call Lisa McCoy at 617-623-2080.

Inhalants & Poisons

they’re right under your nose

National Awareness Week  
March 21-27, 1999

Youth to Produce PSA Video on Inhalant Abuse

Teens from two youth groups, Bay State Community Services H<sub>2</sub>O and the Somerville Haitian Coalition Y-HAT, are creating a 60 second Public Service Announcement (PSA) video on inhalant abuse. Based around the theme of basketball, the youth talk about how using inhalants can destroy brain cells, make lungs stop breathing, a heart stop beating, and muscles deteriorate.

Before writing the script, the teens were given a training on inhalant abuse. Advisors from Bay State Community Services and the Massachusetts Prevention Center in Cambridge, along with Todd Glacy of Rx Productions, worked with the peer leaders to write the script and produce the video.

The committed group of youth created a 60 second PSA targeted to the high risk group of seventh- and eighth-graders with a positive message. It was important to present the message in a way that would allow viewers to learn about the dangers of inhalants without teaching them what products are being used and how they are being abused.

The video will be sent to cable television stations throughout the state and copies will be distributed to the Prevention Center libraries. If you would like more information about the PSA, please contact the Task Force at 617-623-2080.